Thoughts on Megillat Esther--for Shabbat Zakhor, March 7, 2009

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The reading of the Scroll of Esther is a central feature of the Purim holiday. We read it on the night of Purim as well as on the morning of Purim day. We all know the story of how the Jews of the ancient Persian Empire were threatened with destruction, and how they were saved through the efforts of Mordecai and Esther. Yet, there are a number of troubling questions that need to be addressed.

1. Mordecai is described as a strongly-identified Jew; yet, he asks Esther to conceal her Jewishness when going to the king's palace. Why?

2. Why did Esther agree to marry a non-Jewish king?

3. Why didn't anyone in the king's employ realize that Esther was Jewish?

It would seem that Mordecai and Esther are actually "bad" role models for the Jewish people. We teach pride in our identity; we oppose assimilation and intermarriage. Proper religious leaders would not condone their behavior. It would seem that Esther was indeed an assimilated Jewish woman. There was nothing about her that gave away the fact that she was Jewish; she blended in perfectly with Persian society. Not even the king and his retinue had a clue that Esther was Jewish. Mordecai--although a proudly-identified Jew--seems to have decided that it was best for Esther to pass herself off as a non-Jew and to marry the non-Jewish king.

If Mordecai and Esther are so assimilated (even their names are Persian, not Hebrew), how is it that they are heroes of Purim, and that the Scroll of Esther is part of our Bible? Here is a suggestion: the book of Esther teaches us that even in the worst of circumstances when Jews lack appropriate religious leadership, the Almighty finds ways to redeem our people. No Jew--no matter how assimilated--should be counted out; on the contrary, every Jew could be the one to help his/her people in times of distress. The Scroll of Esther is included in our Bible to remind us that each Jew can play a significant role in the unfolding of our history and tradition. It is no wonder that Esther was a source of inspiration to crypto-Jews of all generations; she was a historic reminder that even Jews living in hiding could rise to greatness on behalf of the Jewish people.

As we celebrate Purim this year, let us reaffirm our commitment to our teachings and our traditions. Let us also reaffirm our commitment to all our fellow Jews, regardless of their levels of religiosity and Jewish identification. As we face the many challenges to Israel and to world Jewry, let each of us imagine how we can play a role in the unfolding greatness and redemption of the Jewish people.

PASSOVER REMINDER: As Passover approaches, you may want to order copies of the Sephardic Haggadah prepared by Rabbi Marc Angel, and Sephardic Holiday Cooking by Gilda Angel. These books are available through our Institute's online store, jewishideas.org

Angel for Shabbat